

RIP: Science on TV

[Dr. M May 30, 2012](#)

Remember when MTV actually aired music? Remember when you could learn something from the Learning Channel? Got actual history on the History Channel? Or actually make a real discovery about something other than guns or auctions on Discovery Channel? Remember when nature was cool enough no sensationalism was needed?

And remember when Animal Planet actually showed programs about real animals? Animal Planet has decided to run a Monster Week , “a weeklong network programming stunt”. [Those are their words not mine](#). The “crescendo”, again their words, is a special titled Mermaids: The Body Found. And o’ is it special and one hell of a stunt.

I will admit right here I’ve not seen it. Much like I won’t visit the Creation Museum, I won’t watch this bullshit. Both could give me me some laughs but ultimately would kill off what little soul I have left. For another 5-10 minutes I still have faith in humanity, I choose not to shorten that.

The story

Once upon a time, there lived a little mermaid in an underwater kingdom. She ventured to surface, longing to communicate with people on land...This is a fairytale told and retold to children everywhere; it’s a beloved story about a legendary creature that’s described in the mythologies of nearly every human culture in history. People across all continents who’ve had no communications with other societies have described the same half-man, half-fish anomaly – they’ve spoken about the *same* mythic animal. What if there’s a kernel of truth that lives beneath the legend of the mythic mermaid? Now, in MERMAIDS: THE BODY FOUND...Animal Planet brings viewers into the world where the legend is real. The film blends real-life events and phenomena with the story of two scientists who testify they found the remains of a never-before-identified sea creature. Spectacular CGI animates a world where mermaids really do swim below the water’s surface, cooperatively hunt with dolphins and may continue to survive in an intricate society where they stay hidden in fear of their Earth-bound relatives...

MERMAIDS: THE BODY FOUND is a story about evolutionary possibility grounded in a radical scientific theory – the Aquatic Ape Theory, which claims that humans had an aquatic stage in our evolutionary past. While coastal flooding millions of

years ago turned some of our ancestors inland, is it possible that one group of our ancestors didn't retreat from water but rather went in deeper? Could they have ventured farther into sea out of necessity and to find food? The Aquatic Ape Theory makes it possible to believe that while we evolved into terrestrial humans, our aquatic relatives turned into something strangely similar to the fabled mermaid.

MERMAIDS: THE BODY FOUND makes a strong case for the existence of the mermaid, a creature with a surprisingly human evolutionary history, whose ancestral branch splits off from a shared human root. The film is science fiction, using science as a springboard into imagination and centering the story on [two] real-world events.

At the website this text is preceded with

Editor's Note: This two-hour special is science fiction based on some real events and scientific theory.

All this is so bad that Snopes.com [actually has entry for this](#). Have I used the word appalled yet? A friend of DSN a fellow for Media and Democracy and a major university stated this in email that drew my attention to this farce

It was one of the most ridiculously misleading pieces of programming I've ever seen on any Discovery-affiliated channel. It was a mockumentary (although this wasn't disclosed until the very end of the credits) explaining the "aquatic ape theory" using interviews with fake "maritime scientists," CGI and photoshopped historical records. I know some of the programming on these channels is pretty bad, but this seemed to bring things to a whole new level.

So I would like to respond with a **DSN Editor's Note**

DSN Editor's Note: This two-hour special is fiction based on no real world events and a scientific hypothesis with no evidence and long ago discounted (and laughed at) by real scientists. DSN is appalled that Animal Planet

1. cannot pick at least one of the millions of real organisms on this planet as the subject of a special (if you need some help just ask us here at DSN or any two year old),
2. heralding a phase where biodiversity of life on earth is not enough and we need to make animals up to entertain. (Do Animal Planet producers ever interact with the real public or do they make them up too? Every time I talk about any organism with public, from children to adults, in classrooms, bars, or aquariums, they are fascinated. When did this become hard?)
3. put forth fiction as fact on a channel people expect fact from. (even more appalling is waiting until the credits to admit this is a mockumentary),

4. putting any stock into the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis ([indeed it is not even science but pseudoscience](#)),

5. and having actors play scientists spout off made up shit in a mockumentary that you do not announce to the end (way to denigrate scientists and life we've dedicated ourselves to. I guess that big fancy Ph.D I have, all those years of research, and reading of actual scientific literature was f'n pointless. I can just take an acting class online and make shit up).

DSN demands an apology from Animal Planet for selling fiction based on fiction off as anything but fiction on channel that should be celebrating the diversity of actual life.

UPDATE:

And for those who don't think any damage was done



First a celebrity and her sisters (for reasons I still don't understand), tweet to there followers. One of the Kardashians alone as almost 15,000,000 followers. The is a huge ring of influence and it's clear not all of them realized that the mermaid story was a mockumentary.

Of course, throughout Twitter the ramifications were seen of Animal Planetnot clearly states this WAS NOT REAL.





Feven Melake @faygualer

4h

Watching "mermaid found body" on animal planet with @JessReaves this is so crazy but yet makes so much sense!! #mindblowing!!

Expand



Marisa Torres @maris1r1sa

8h

Yes! Im still tripping out but always knew it was trueRT @KimKardashian: Did anyone see the Mermaid special on Animal Planet? I'm so curious

Expand



Xochitl Lemus @xochitllemus

5m

I kee thinking about the mermaid documentary. That shit insaneeee.

Expand



Dillon Mathis @Dmathis420

21h

This show called mermaid just came on animal planet. Mermaids are real.The government has been hiding it the whole time.

Expand

Even worse is children taken in by this, who may not have developed the filters to distinguish between science and pseudoscience



April S @AprilsCLblog

9h

My 8yr old has been going on and on about it... Animal Planet's mermaid special& bit.ly/LfNDXf via @today_clicker

Expand Reply Retweet Favorite

Luckily, some people realized it was a fake. However, how many stopped watching before the announcement?



Hannah Cvizic @ehovizic

2h

@KayJavins94 oh my gosh! Animal Planet just admitted that the whole Mermaid movie was false!! I feel so dumb

Expand

Apparently some missed the brief message.



Rachel Downing @ayayorayayay

23h

Just watched a 1 1/2 hrs of a mermaid documentary on animal planet. Apparently they are real. #What

Expand

But thankfully many on Twitter seem to be as appalled as us.



NicoleJGardnerAustin @SlickNikkiBobby

22h

Thanks a lot history channel I think I just learned stuff, but animal planet? Shame on you for that fake fucking mermaid bullshit.

Expand

Indeed! Shame on you for that fake fucking mermaid bullshit!



Megan M

May 31, 2012 at 00:07 · Reply

I've already had 2 students from prior Intro to Anthropology classes e-mail me with questions because of this show. And I'm annoyed about it. But really, archaeologists have been dealing with this kind of crap for years, just in other formats – I mean there is a show on History Channel CALLED Ancient Aliens, and it has at least 4 seasons. I've also seen specials that try to suggest that the Mayan Apocolypse is actually a legitimate possibility. The fact that that sort of pseudoscience gets portrayed as true science is extremely frustrating. So while a mockumentary on Animal Planet about mermaids is annoying, to me this is just another show in a long line of mislabeled 'science education'.



Dr. M

May 31, 2012 at 16:57 · Reply

Funny I was going to mention Ancient Aliens. But I decided to pick just one battle. A colleague referred to programs on these channels as scientainment



Megan M.

May 31, 2012 at 17:22 · Reply

I have actually incorporated a discussion of pseudoscience in pop culture into my Intro Course now, because I know that the bulk of my students are coming in with this information, and no classroom-based knowledge of anthropology. This requires me to break them down and then rebuild. And every semester I am sure to say 'and if ANYONE says ANYTHING about aliens on their exam I will FLUNK you.'

The good thing about that? Students feel comfortable e-mailing me when they see this crap. They know I'm happy to redirect to good sources.



Jon

May 31, 2012 at 04:19 · Reply

A few years ago Darlow-Smithson (who made the excellent “Touching the Void” documentary) made “The Last Dragon”, another “mockumentary” about what the natural history of dragons would be like, if they really existed, complete with actors playing fake scientists investigating it.

So perhaps this Mermaids crap is not just crap, but derivative crap at that! And just as we have “counterfactual” history (e.g. what would the world be like if the Third Reich had prevailed etc?), we now have “counterfactual” natural history?

Even in actual documentaries these days, it’s never just about the subject, but usually the “journey of the presenter”, as if audiences can’t be engaged without that “human interest” element. While narrative is important, those of us who talk to public audiences about our research know there are other ways to do that, and the hackneyed “journey of the presenter” is pretty damn patronising (if not downright lazy).

These days most show producers / commissioning editors also seem to think audiences have to be told something is “amazing!” by an over-enthusiastic presenter, in order for audiences to be amazed by it. But you didn’t get from the likes of Sagan and Attenborough, who guided audiences skilfully through material and let it speak for itself.

Flying spaghetti monster help us all. Perhaps one silver lining: the dross served in many documentaries means that many public audiences are really keen to hear about real research from real researchers. But as Craig points out, there is also widespread damage from this “mockumentary” crap. To end my rant on a deep-sea point, I’ll paraphrase William Beebe: in his first in situ observations of deep-sea fish, he commented that they could “outdragon” any mere figment of human imagination.



Glendon Mellow

May 31, 2012 at 08:58 · Reply

As a guy who makes his bread and butter from speculative biological fiction, I totally agree with you Craig. There’s a time and a place for science-inspired fiction, and tricking people in a half-assed way with a documentary *wink wink* isn’t it. If this show had aired on SyFy it’d be a different story.



para_sight

May 31, 2012 at 09:18 · Reply

That’s the key point isn’t it? No one’s saying we can’t have fanciful creative TV. Let’s just call it what it is and put it on the right channel.



Steve Weintz

June 2, 2012 at 15:22 · Reply

Seconded. This is just lazy and contemptible. Give me the same production, and I’d frame the whole thing as a thought experiment and invite REAL scientists to play. Same budget, same story, just some professional behavior, is all. Oh, I forgot — Hollywood has joined Detroit and DC as high-school make-work camps.



Bill Coffin

May 31, 2012 at 09:06 · Reply

Animal Planet is not a science channel, nor has it been for some time. It is a lifestyle channel for those who identify with animals, much as MTV is a lifestyle channel for those who identify with bad music and vapidty.

I think the Mermaids show is disingenuous, but it is also pretty obviously fiction. But I can see how others might think it real, and it was certainly promoted as real. That is the problem, really...letting misunderstanding about the content help promote the content. Creating a mockumentary about mythic creatures is silly content, no sillier, really, than half of the content Animal Planet runs on a daily basis.

Watching television is like eating food. Most of it is bad for you. Make smart choices about your time and be happy about it. Getting upset that people make and watch crap TV is a bit like shouting at the rain.



John K. Patterson

May 31, 2012 at 11:12 · Reply

Aside from the occasional gullible soul, does this kind of mockumentary actually fool anyone? The show is obviously fiction, and you guys should give people more credit — they know it's a speculative exercise. It's fun, it encourages us to look at nature that **does** exist in a new way, and it reminds you to keep yourself open to at least the possibility of new discoveries.

Frankly, if someone thinks this or "Dragons: A Fantasy Made Real" are actually harming science or the public's understanding of it, it just shows a staggering lack of imagination on their part. That's like saying we should ignore "Jurassic Park" for its biological inaccuracies, even though it sparked a renewed interest in dinosaurs and sparked the imagination of a whole generation of paleontologists. For goodness's sake, use this show as a springboard to get some curious minds interested in the ocean and its wonders! Don't trash these documentaries just because they try answering questions like "What if mermaids were real?" or "What if dragons existed?"

What better place than Animal Planet to show people a speculative scenario that opens them up to all the weird and surprising possibilities that nature actually **does** hold?



Jamie

May 31, 2012 at 16:52 · Reply

I don't really understand what you're so pissed about. You speak about the fact that The Kardashians have thousands of followers and that they are thinking it's real because the Kardashians do... of course... they are fans of the KARDASHIANS!!!! What do you expect! lol If some one is naive enough to believe something from something called MONSTER WEEK or from what they hear from a KARDASHIAN without doing any of their own research then does it really matter what they think or believe. I think it's just an entertaining movie and I don't understand why you care SO MUCH about what some idiot's believe. What does it hurt? YOU seem to know it's not a real documentary, I know, I'm positive a lot of others know it too. Who really cares if some people are so simple that they believe EVERYTHING they are told.



Dr. M

May 31, 2012 at 17:15 · Reply

I'm pissed because I don't believe in writing off parts of society of good science and understanding of the natural world. I don't think labeling someone as an idiot is particularly helpful either. My point is the influence that the Kardashians have. Imagine the power if one of the Kardashians actually spread some interesting scientific fact

"hey did you all know that sea slugs contain both male and female parts?" It is all science for the win!

Whereas I do know this is fake, it is clear many did not. I found thousands of comments on Twitter to this effect. It hurts because it is not true and it is not science. It gives people an incorrect view of the world around them

Again, I not sure why you and John above feel it is alright to ignore a large part of society because they are ignorant. Why not try to get the correct information out to everyone?



BChristie

May 31, 2012 at 18:59 · Reply

Sadly I feel the bulk of the American population has become less scientifically literate in my (relatively short) lifetime. Things such as Shark Week on the Discovery Channel and the like drove me towards the marine sciences as a profession, and as a result I quit watching TV altogether as Discovery was nothing but motorcycle shows and the rest of the purportedly educational channels were filled with similar druck.

Perhaps the "documentary" filmmakers from Animal Planet stumbled across the 1990 paper from Limnology and Oceanography and failed to realize that tongue was firmly in cheek when this was published:

http://web.uvic.ca/~starzom/Banse1990_MermaidBiology.pdf

...probably not, but at least it was clear in this instance that satire was being presented and neither the authors or target audience were confused as to the nature of the article.



Jeanna

June 1, 2012 at 08:50 · Reply

Wait a minute, and get off your haughty high seahorses. You do not have to be a moron to believe this, just a moron if you do not research later on. I have only had cable for about a month and never watched Animal Planet before last night. I tuned in about 15 minutes in and didn't know what I was watching. I had no idea these "scientists were actors". I was presented evidence that debunked the theories I thought I knew to be scientific fact and so I watched. Any good scientist would know that science is constantly presenting us with new possibilities; to rule them out based on nothing other than previous speculation would make one truly a moron. If the movie was based on facts, there would be some compelling arguments to explore. I sat there and thought wtf, mermaids are real?! And so I did what any intelligent person does, I researched it more... that's why I'm here. I thought the show was real. I graduated with a 4.0 in a science field. I'm not an idiot by any means. As for people that follow the Kardashians Twitter posts.... well that would take some explaining.